

Global Governance against World Government?

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Posted: 15 August 2015

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While most debates about the feasibility of a world government focus upon whether authority can be transferred upwards from of governments of nation-states, another important question is whether the idea of government itself can actually be invoked in an era where the idea and practice of governance is so prominent. After all, in the 1990s when the idea of world government was being revived in the light of cosmopolitan scholarship, there was also the growing recognition that policymaking in many states was taking on the more decentralised complexion of being the governance of many different actors rather than the hierarchical image of government. While there are many dynamics in the rise of governance as an idea and practice, it is clear that one of the principle prompts for governance was the rise of neo-liberalism and free market thinking which led governments to delegate and outsource political influence to markets and other agencies. Indeed, in 1986 Ronald Reagan famously claimed that "the nine most terrifying words in the English language are: I'm from the government and I'm here to help".

Consequently, while global governance can be seen to have some of the rudiments of a world government (Goodin 2012) and thus a suitable foundation for a prospective world government, I want to argue in this brief contribution that this may not be the case. Rather, the predominance of governance domestically and globally may not be the strong or straightforward basis for world government as often thought. How can scholars interested in developing and articulating the idea of world government consider the purposively disaggregated nature of public rule as a challenge to the idea of world government? This contribution first considers the idea of global governance and then outlines some of the pathways from global governance to some form of world government.

Global Governance

The term governance is beset by varying usages. Sometime the term governance is used as a synonym for all forms of governing, and this is the predominate usage with respect to global governance. Global Governance is a contested term but in essence refers to the various forms of global human activity aimed to addressing common goals and enabling cooperation. Governance suggests all forms of authority, cooperation or management – be they public or private, formal or informal – that provide order (Bevir and Hall 2011, Weiss 2009). However, global governance does not mean world government. Governance, is a broader - more encompassing phenomenon than government which includes formal authority and informal influence. We clearly can see, for example, that while the UN is the centrepiece of global governance, that the UN has little

authority over states, it cannot generally direct states what to do, but there are various forms of persuasion and capability that the UN possess that makes states take heed of UN norms and proposals. As such, the term global governance emphasises the fact that there exists a variety of systems of decision making at a global level – including the UN – that do not amount to a world government of any kind.

However, in a more particular sense the term governance is also the more specific practice of decentralised rule setting. This is a practice that has risen in prominence since the 1970s because of the influence of new forms of thinking about public policy and public administration which became influential in the Western world and beyond. Mark Bevir (2011: 9) refers to this as “new governance” and makes the point that the “new paradigm denounced bureaucracy and public officials, and championed markets and entrepreneurs. It turned away from what was now derided as big government, bloated bureaucracy, and uniform solutions, and toward a private sector that was now lauded as competitive, efficient, and flexible”. Consequently, markets and networks have become central mechanisms by which societies are governed around the world. The idea that the state contracts out services and functions to markets and civil society is now a common practice in many states and this has decentralised the state, dispersed political responsibility to various actors within society and has also recrafted the expectations that citizens have for their state.

This idea of new governance in local and global governance is clearly related to the rise of neo-liberalism and neo-classical economics (Bevir and Hall 2011: 359-361). Neo-liberalism is a strand of liberal thought that advances a range of policies ushered in by many Western – especially Anglo-Saxon countries – and the multilateral economic institutions (such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund). Neo-liberalism is an ideology and philosophy based on the principle that human welfare is best promoted by economic growth, which in turn is best enabled by reducing the interference of governments in the private sector. Neo-liberals also support measures that enable trade and finance to have unrestricted movement across national borders. These policies attempt to ‘roll back’ the state and the role of government, and leave decisions about allocation, production and distribution in the economy to the global market thereby excluding or limiting measures that restrict or redistribute the wealth of individuals (Gill 1998). These ‘market friendly’ policies are evident in the policies of deregulation that remove ‘political’ interferences and rules from the operation of markets, privatisation which entails the sale of state assets to the private sector or the ‘contracting out’ of public services to the private sector, and the liberalisation of restrictions on the movements of capital or trade across state borders. These policies have been influential around the world and have replaced the more moderate Keynesian liberalism that sought economic growth and social stability by allowing an active domestic role for the government. Indeed, in the 1980s Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher demonstrated a profound distrust of the idea that governments were the solution to the economic malaise of the time. While neo-liberalism is not the only driver of governance, it is certainly an important one.

Understanding governance in this decentralised sense has significant consequences for the prospects for world government. First, global governance is an extremely complicated set of arrangements that do not neatly encompass an entity which can be seen to be a unified decision making process or a coherent regulatory system. Contemporary global governance refers to

international and transnational rule setting mechanisms which includes public and private forms of activity which encompasses formal International Governmental Organisations (IGOs) set up by states, private forms of regulation established by business, the networking of transnational civil society as well as hybrid forms of governance that blur these forms of rule setting and transnational policy networks which include private and public actors (Hale and Held 2011, Stone 2008). The disaggregated nature of these forms of governance vary in their capacity to effectively address global problems with some instruments being decidedly stronger than others and there being some significant duplications of responsibility. There are also key areas of world politics subject to weak, incomplete or non-existent forms of global governance.

Furthermore, Thomas Weiss (2009: 258) makes the important observation that governance is all we have in the international context:

At the national level we have the authoritative structures of government supplemented by governance; but internationally we simply have governance with some architectural drawings that are seven decades old and not up to present building codes, along with unstable ground and shifting foundations under existing structures.

Aside from brief moments of solidarity in the UN Security Council or General Assembly, there is little or no sense of authority or centralisation in the organs and systems that comprise global governance. Far from meaning that we live in an anarchical world, this does however mean that a global level there is a very high dependence on the uncertain activity of markets and civil society to identify and provide public goods. It is essentially “organized volunteerism” (Scott Barrett quoted in Weiss 2009: 264). This complexity and differences between various forms of governance complicate the idea that global governance is a straightforward foundation for world government.

Second, even global institutions which are set up only by states are facing challenges in being effective let alone a solid foundation for global government. Clearly, national interests, sovereignty and multilateralism still largely influence the contours of global governance, but in many respects multilateralism was so successful in enabling interdependence and globalization with respect to a growing number of states that this system has become overloaded and gridlocked (Hale, Held and Young 2013). It is also the case that many areas of global governance have significant domestic implications that complicate and frustrate easy international cooperation. The difficulties in advancing the free trade agenda within the World Trade Organization and in advancing an internationally binding multilateral response to climate change are often cited as key examples (Hale and Held 2011: 3). This image of gridlock challenges early images of supporters of global cooperation that such activity represents “an unstoppable progression” to some form of more centralised and coherent system (Weiss 2009: 262).

Third, despite decentralisation and a lack of authority, there is no doubt that forms of governance can be effective in specific issue areas. But questions arise as to the level of public oversight and democracy of these arrangements and as to whether these arrangements meet the needs of the world most vulnerable. Indeed, Luis Cabrera (2014) notes with the respect to the impact of the protests against the WTO meeting in Seattle in 1999 that this pointed to a democratic deficit and “many in the streets saw the WTO as a shadow global economic government, setting the rules of

international trade for most of the world's countries, but with little direct input from their peoples". This concern was amplified by many of the socially regressive consequences of neo-liberal policymaking which prioritised the interests of capitalism over key points of public concern. Despite the development of elaborate forms of global governance set up by states and societal agents, there are still questions whether these forms of governance can be centralised and held to account to those people affected by these forms of decision making.

Lastly, civil society activity looms large as important driver for any effort in increasing the centralisation and accountability of global governance. While transnational forms of activism and civil society have an extensive history, the presence, activity and variety of transnational NGOs has escalated in the last few decades as the costs of organising and publicising activity have significantly decreased (Dryzek 2011: 215-16). This activity is due to the existence of information technology and global systems of media which enables communication and dialogue via various media technologies, actors and frameworks, and includes the activity of civil society groups and social movements with an array of political agendas. However, while not all civil society groups are cosmopolitan or progressive, it is also the case that civil society groups would likely differ over whether they support specific proposals for the centralisation of global governance and whether their groups should be involved in the system or be separate from it. In many respects most civil society actors remain focused on advancing the interests of those people they are attempting to protect and represent, rather than devoting scarce resources to advancing some form of grand systematic change.

Pathways to Government

These factors combine to indicate that the impediment to any notion of world government is not only states jealously guarding their sovereignty and power. It may well be the case that global governance serves to resist world government because of its complexity and the extremely variegated nature of the stakeholders in global governance. Indeed, the relatively recent development of the G20 may be instructive in this regard. At one level the G20 can be seen to be a recent effort of classic interstate diplomacy and summitry. But what is interesting in the G20 since its formation as a finance ministers forum in 1999 and a leaders forum in 2008 is the resistance from member states to developing any formalisation of the G20 or the development of an ongoing centralised secretariat. Despite this resistance, there has been the development of G20 working groups which include transgovernmental networks of government officials and outside experts with respect to specific policy areas and attempts by G20 leaders to engage various social sector networks with the policymaking activity of the G20 in the form of the Think 20 (think tanks), Labour 20, Business 20, Civil 20 and Youth 20 which include representatives from these sectors (Harris Rimmer, 2014). These networks indicate that innovations in global cooperation seems to be locked clearly into more elaborate forms of governance.

Of course the proceeding points could be seen to indicate that governance is a 'work around' that enables international cooperation and policy coordination despite the existence of sovereign states. Indeed, the challenges noted could be seen to be reasons for needing a world government to coordinate and oversee these variegated processes. But it seems to assume much that any world government would be democratic rather than some neo-liberal or technocratic world government. A democratic world government would need to be formed from these elements and

there are different positions and pathways to some form of democratic world government (Cabrera 2010). Indeed, it is important to indicate that there is a body of literature which could be referred to as “global democratic theory” that points to various scholarly positions which attempt to promote democracy within the context of globalisation (Bray and Slaughter 2015). Two broad directions, which possibly overlap, loom large with regards to the possibility of realising a democratic world government.

One key direction may be to revive the idea of government within state. That is, some modes of liberal, as well as social democratic and republican democratic theory could be seen to actively argue against neo-liberal forms of governance (Slaughter 2005). These approaches can be seen to want to reign in governance and ensure that markets and civil society are more clearly transparent and accountable to governments. This revival of centralised government naturally runs the risk of reviving nationalism and even being seen to be antiquated and unrealistic. However, liberal, social democratic and republican theories can all be seen to have a cosmopolitan and internationalist impulses that permit some form of confederation. It may be that a stronger focus on government could lead to the state being the central transmission point between the public and global forms of government. One largely liberal idea in this vein is the Proposed United Nations Parliamentary Assembly comprised of nations-states delegating their elected legislators to a new democratic chamber of the United Nations alongside the Security Council and General Assembly (United Nations Parliamentary Assembly 2015).

The other direction is to attempt to democratise global governance rather than create an overarching electoral body in the hope that this will eventually create a more centralised system for global decision making. One option here is the promotion of transnational deliberative processes which accord with Critical Theory underpinnings of deliberative and discursive democracy (Dryzek 2006, 2011). There have been arguments for developing deliberative inputs into specific forms of global governance including those which inform international financial governance (Germain 2010), the WTO (Higgott and Erman 2010), and the G20 (Slaughter 2013). In these cases these forums of global governance could act as what Randall Germain (2010: 501) terms an “institutional anchor”, which creates public spheres constituted by deliberation between officials of global governance and citizens. In these cases the advantage of this approach is that this contestation could be of the discourses and deliberations at play rather than attempting to include all of humanity into these decision-making processes, and thus can be seen to be more proactive and able to influence the agenda of these IGOs. These approaches do not argue for a world government, for them discursive engagement is enough. This engagement could involve political institutions, such as a “Deliberative Global Citizens’ Assembly” (Dryzek, Bachtiger, and Milewicz 2011), which could be a globally representative advisory body to deliberate specific global issues. It is also important to consider the value of positions which develop overlapping “postmodern global democracies” (Scholte 2014) which also overtly and purposely avoid the creation of centralised formal institutions while still attempting to create transnational forms of democracy and deliberation.

Conclusion

This brief contribution has suggested that global governance may not be straightforward foundation for a world government. In the heyday of world government thinking in the

immediate aftermath of World War Two (Cabrera 2010), the idea of government was a more straightforward alternative to state sovereignty because global governance was less elaborate and evident. However, any contribution to the world state debate cannot ignore in the high stakes of the global perils of nuclear war, transnational terrorism, environmental disaster or global poverty. Consequently, it is important to consider the way contemporary global governance can be more effective in meeting these challenges as well as possibly be a foundation for a more coherent system of world government. But in doing so it would be unfortunate to replicate the problems we have seen in the history of centralised government, so any transition from governance to government needs to consider the problems of contemporary neo-liberal forms of governance while keeping in mind the virtues of decentralised governance. While thinking about global political integration we need to be open minded that the idea of world government or global democracy may look very different to just national government or democracy writ large.

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